Political Prying

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It would be ludicrous, if it were not also ominous, to see the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation engaged in ferocious verbal combat with the student government of an American college. Some Davids in the student governing body of Wesleyan University had the audacity to protest against an FBI attempt to procure the membership list of the campus chapter of Students for a Democratic Society. They received a characteristically thunderous reply, impugning their motives, from the Goliath of the FBI before whom strong Presidents quail and Attorneys General tremble.

Never one to whisper when he can roar, Mr. Hoover wrote to the Wesleyan College Body Committee, "Your statement that the FBI investigation is extremely hostile to the goal of academic freedom is not only utterly false but also is so irresponsible as to cast serious doubt on the quality of academic reasoning or the motivation behind it." Nevertheless, the plain truth is that an FBI inquiry into the membership of a campus organization is inescapably intimidating and damaging in effect; and it is consequently hostile to the academic tradition of combatting ideas with the weapons of counter-argument and reason.

The view of the Vietnam war taken by Students for a Democratic Society seems to this newspaper, as it apparently does to Mr. Hoover, a mistaken one. We have confidence, however, in the persuasive power of contrary views and in the loyalty and good sense of college student bodies generally. What earthly business has the FBI, anyway, interfering with this conflict of ideas and short circuiting the democratic process? There is plenty of crime for it to combat.